Consumption Markets & Culture
Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/gcmc20

Revisiting the “passée”: history rewriting in the neo-burlesque community
Annie Blanchettea
a Department of Management, University of Exeter Business School, Exeter, UK
Published online: 21 Mar 2013.

To cite this article: Annie Blanchette (2014) Revisiting the “passée”: history rewriting in the neo-burlesque community, Consumption Markets & Culture, 17:2, 158-184, DOI: 10.1080/10253866.2013.776307

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10253866.2013.776307

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Taylor & Francis makes every effort to ensure the accuracy of all the information (the “Content”) contained in the publications on our platform. However, Taylor & Francis, our agents, and our licensors make no representations or warranties whatsoever as to the accuracy, completeness, or suitability for any purpose of the Content. Any opinions and views expressed in this publication are the opinions and views of the authors, and are not the views of or endorsed by Taylor & Francis. The accuracy of the Content should not be relied upon and should be independently verified with primary sources of information. Taylor and Francis shall not be liable for any losses, actions, claims, proceedings, demands, costs, expenses, damages, and other liabilities whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with, in relation to or arising out of the use of the Content.

This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, redistribution, reselling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden. Terms & Conditions of access and use can be found at http://www.tandfonline.com/page/terms-and-conditions
Revisiting the “passée”: history rewriting in the neo-burlesque community

Annie Blanchette

Department of Management, University of Exeter Business School, Exeter, UK

Neo-burlesque, or the “burlesque revival,” is a movement that emerged in the 1990s, with retro-inclined consumers revisiting old-fashioned striptease performances informed by the burlesque satirical tradition. Based on an 18-month ethnographic immersion in North American neo-burlesque communities, our initial research sought to understand how this movement acts as a forum through which forms of female representations are retrospectively enacted and revisited. While providing for empirical evidences that a feeling of incongruity can be experienced by members of retro communities such as that of neo-burlesque – particularly with regards to gender ideals, including body and sexual identity – this paper argues that certain types of neo-burlesque practices disrupt the nostalgic or contemporary logic of idealisation and, as such, can reinvest non-idealised identities, bodies with new meanings and legitimacy in the present.

Keywords: burlesque; nostalgia; subculture; gender; body; transgression

Introduction

The present research, based on an 18-month immersion in the North American neo-burlesque community, suggests that this movement is a forum where female individuals can not only enact their preference for the past, or retro ideals, but also interact more critically with them. Moreover, it is also a stage where it is possible to revisit a less idealised version of the past, and some of its more transgressive identities. Following an idea borrowed from Queer scholarship, via the work of Levy-Navarro (2008, 2009), this article argues that rewriting the past or revisiting certain identities of the past can sometimes be an opportunity to “foster new attachments” with identities seen as “passée” – non-normative, non-idealised and therefore often undesirable – in the present. It also suggests that this, in turn, can make the present much more hospitable for certain individuals.

As previous consumer researchers and cultural critics have highlighted, propensity to nostalgia is often associated with both a sentiment of dissatisfaction, or incongruity in the present, combined with a rather high level of idealisation of the past. In this sense, very nostalgic individuals can long for or try to escape in an idealised past as a result of a way of coping with different levels of dissatisfaction in the present. These incongruities with the present can result from a feeling of emptiness due to loss of roles and loved ones, or social alienation (Goulding 2001). Conversely, dissatisfactions can also result from a feeling of saturation in the present, especially for “vicarious nostalgics;”
individuals who idealise a past “outside of [their] living memories” (Goulding 2002, 1). The contemporary pace of life, high level of expectations and impending environmental threats have been identified as factors contributing to a sense of “overload” and “powerlessness” in the present (Goulding 2001). Finally, dissatisfaction with the present can also be attributed to one’s perception of a contemporary void in terms of creativity, meaning and styles in an era of pastiche and recuperation (Goulding 2001, 2002, 2003). But Goulding (2001, 2002, 2003) also insists that nostalgia is not just about a feeling of alienation in the present, nor a real desire for reliving the past. Using Holbrook’s (1993) definition of nostalgia as a preference, she observes that it can be foremost an aesthetic predilection for what is perceived as a “Golden age” of creativity and style (2001, 2002, 2003). Taking the case of young “retro junkies,” she observes how adopting a heyday’s sartorial attire and broader lifestyle as part of a retro “tribe” can provide for aesthetic pleasure, a sense of belonging and distinction, as well as a potent form of creative play. The later, in turn, allows deviations from normative identity positions, gender conventions and current style expectations. Nonetheless, whether associated with a coping mechanism, an escape from the present, or a deep-seated preference for yesteryear, the idea of the past, owing to the marketplace and in particular Hollywood, is generally sanitised and stripped from its ambiguities (Goulding 2001, 2002, 2003; Borgerson and Schroeder 2003; Patterson and Brown 2003; Troester 2003) by nostalgic individuals. As Hutcheon puts it:

The simple, pure, ordered, easy, beautiful, or harmonious past is constructed (and then experienced emotionally) in conjunction with the present – which, in turn, is constructed as complicated, contaminated, anarchic, difficult, ugly, and confrontational. Nostalgic distancing sanitizes as it selects, making the past feel complete, stable, coherent, safe . . . (2000, 195)

Existing research has thus generally focused on those who entertain a rather idealised view of the time before. To use the terms of Davis (1979), who distinguishes between three orders of nostalgia, researchers have observed “simple” nostalgics, which can include “vicarious” ones; people who believe that the past was either a better place, or at least more meaningful in terms of aesthetics. On the other hand, the domain of “reflective nostalgia” – people who refrain from sentimentalisation while questioning how the past really was – or “interpreted nostalgia” – where one tries to objectify and analyze critically his or her experienced nostalgia – seems virtually nonexistent. A context like neo-burlesque suggests that more self-aware or critical readings, and the revisiting of less idealised versions of the past, can coexist with the community’s “rose-tinted,” even rose-infused, nostalgic rendition of the past.

The neo-burlesque community

Also known as the burlesque revival, neo-burlesque is a female-driven phenomenon that emerged in the 1990s with generally amateur female performers revisiting old-time striptease practices. With their tongue-in-cheek humour, and their opulent costumes – often reminiscent of the Victorian era or 1930–1950s pin-up imagery – these women usually focus on the sensual and comical act of “teasing” (generally emphasising “trivial” gestures such as the removing of a glove or a sock), rather than the sole activity of “stripping bare” a female body. Often staged in retro-styled venues or actual old-time cabarets, neo-burlesque shows lure their spectators into a world of subdued lighting draped in sumptuous, red velvet curtains, simultaneously
evoking luxury and old-world glamour, combined with an all-consuming sense of nostalgia. The cumulative effect of these retro elements, including “slapstick” masters of ceremony, old-fashioned “light-relief” novelty acts, period(-inspired) music, sartorial attire, props and demeanour, as well as the enthusiastic interaction of the costumed audience with the performer on stage, allows for the collective construction of a nostalgic alternative reality: “a time out of time” (Turner 1986; Belk and Costa 1998).

One aspect that characterises members of the neo-burlesque community – aside from their ambiguous position as both conspicuous retro consumers and producers via their stage performance and widespread DIY (do it yourself) ethos – is that they suggest a form of body diversity, including shape, size and skin colour which is rather a forgotten aspect of mass-mediated female representation. Another characteristic aspect of the neo-burlesque community is the feminist allegiance of their practices, which some describe as empowering for women. The neo-burlesque movement has received numerous feminist critiques for supposedly promoting female self-objectification via a traditional tool of patriarchy, notably. Willson (2008), however, grounding her argument in issues of representation of femininity and female desire, makes a great case of neo-burlesque as a post-feminist practice, with the neo-burlesque or burlesque icon evolving – like a hyphen – between traditional feminist ideology and their diametrically opposed, apathetic or antifeminist sentiment, referred to as “postfeminist” (without the hyphen):

This (…) hyphen is ripe with what is and has been the most vibrant, ambivalent and provocatively divide discourse in feminist discourse – the female body and its representation and pleasure. Burlesque sits at this point of contradiction, struggle and resistance, at that dichotomous interception between feminism and postfeminism. (2008, 11)

Whether it can be accepted as a feminist endeavour or not, the recuperation of retro striptease performances by a wide range of young women, takes elements of female representation, including discourses on body diversity and female sexuality, or overall gendered behavioural norms, to the central stage. While, in the case of Goulding’s vicarious retro aficionados, consumers tend to worship the images of a past “where men were men and women were glamorous” (2003, 58) – if albeit sometimes, focusing on more dominant (2003), or curvier icons (Goulding and Saren 2009). In the case of neo-burlesque, revisiting the past is also an opportunity to celebrate a non-idealised past, or non-idealised identities.

It might be helpful to recall that, before being popularised as a striptease practice (somewhere around the 1920s in North America) which is rather known for spectacularising en vogue female bodies, burlesque was a subversive and transgressive tradition. If anything, it regarded the dominant logic of idealisation with contempt, instead celebrating “low,” non-idealised identities. As a striptease performance, it draws its origins from the burlesque theatrical genre, popularised in the UK in the mid-nineteenth century and resulting from a humorous tradition as old as time itself (Tracey 2003). Etymologically speaking, burlesque (from the Latin “burla”) signifies “mockery” and “jesting,” and was originally used as a satirical device by British working class to spoof the more noble or “high” forms of art of the upper crust, as well as their disembodied pretensions and aspirations (Tracey 2003). Relying upon the art of double-entendre, burlesque allowed people to mock and counteract oppression, and to provide a fresh perspective on “reality.” Burlesque shows comprising comical and absurd sketches – “slapstick” acts often revolving around sexuality and other
“inglorious,” grotesque or embodied human traits – was seen as a popular form of entertainment which both offered escapism from the daily grind, and served as a celebration of the simple pleasures of the working class.

According to historian Allen (1991), American burlesque – morphing from its British import to become mostly characterised by female shows, and later, striptease – had important political relevance at the end of the nineteenth century. This type of performance, popularised by the Briton Lydia Thompson and her troupe in 1868 America, was an act of transgression from the era’s representation of femininity and a source of considerable upheaval. At a time when theatrical performance was still a male-only privilege, Thompson and her troupe stretched the boundaries of gender conventions, not only just aping, but also spoofing men in their adulterated version of classical epic pieces (which also suggests that the original burlesque genre was already if not revivalist, a “revisitationist” movement). Dressed as men, and therefore wearing clothing deemed by the confines of society to be too revealing for them, these women also deviated from feminine etiquette by addressing the public directly, with double-entendre and bawdy political comments. According to Allen, “What audiences saw on this stage full of male-impersonating, revealing-attired, slang-spouting, minstrel dancing women was a physical and ideological inversion of the Victorian ideal of femininity” (1991, 138).

These manifestations of “unbridled femininity” induced widespread curiosity, thus attracting record, mixed audiences. Allen contends that this has contributed to establishing a demand for the spectacularisation and sexualisation of the feminine body – accounting greatly for its current emphasis in today’s visual culture. On the other hand, these feminine transgressive performances challenged the taken-for-granted definition of femininity and proposed new identity alternatives. Allen thus also highlights how the voluptuous appearance of Lydia Thompson and her acolytes redefined the feminine beauty norms of the time “from the slender, asexual, steel-engraving lady to the large breasted, big-hipped ideal of the feminine physique” (1991, 138). These challenged norms were greatly similar to those ideals of our current visual culture marketplace (which suggests that idealising past identities can also be in line with contemporary ideals and expectations), with the exception maybe of the sexualisation of women – historically latent but awakened in a paradoxical and ironic fashion as a result of the popularisation of feminine burlesque.

As a result of their popularly acclaimed performances, these burlesquers revalued an “embodied,” even grotesque model, associated with the past and the proletarian class, the antithesis of the ethereal, contained and “high” archetype of the already fashionable romantic ballerina (Allen 1991). But the author suggests that this transgression, thanks to sexual charisma and inversion of the feminine norms – the “explosive recipe of burlesque” – was “too hot to handle” (1991, 271) in the early days of burlesque. Allen thus highlights the efforts made to dilute the transgressive role of burlesquers, notably by silencing them and shifting the focus on the exposition of increasingly idealised, sexualised yet asexual bodies. Allen, for instance, recalls how institutions such as the Ziegfeld and Minsky review “stripped” the burlesquer performers of their unruly characteristics and capitalised on their sexually enticing spectacle:

In the Ziegfeld girl, the sexually expressive female was reconstituted through the excor- poration (literally and figuratively) of what was left of the burlesque performer’s threatening qualities. She might have been an icon of sexual modernity for her male and female spectators, but there was nothing daunting or troublesome about the Ziegfeld girl’s wholesome, doll-like, decorative sexuality. (1991, 282)
While it is unclear as to exactly how the striptease element of burlesque became integrated, sometime before the 1920s, performances became increasingly sanitised from their transgressive qualities and focused on the exhibition of idealised female body forms, to the point of burlesque becoming synonymous with striptease in the USA. Although a great number of neo-burlesque performers focus on revisiting the later more “ideal,” sanitised (notwithstanding their striptease element) forms of burlesque representations, as opposed to the rather transgressive manifestations of Thompson’s time – and this is increasingly the case as a result of the on-going commercialisation of the burlesque genre – Thompsonian sensibility is often a palpable if not core element of more dissident grassroots performances.

The temporal logic of idealisation

Discussing the pervasiveness of “forward-looking” moral models or ideals, which often come with the promise of a righteous sense of accomplishment, or a fulfilled, eudaemonic existence, Levy-Navarro exposes what she sees as a cultural tendency to “bow down to an elusive, utopian future and thus dismiss our pasts as over and done with” (Levy-Navarro 2009, 17). For instance, using the before-and-after diet rhetoric, she illustrates how the present self, positioned as “before,” is usually seen as a hindrance that needs to be transcended, or eradicated, in order to embrace a thin (an often utopian), happy and healthy ever “after” self. Featherstone’s observation could not be more consistent with Levy-Navarro’s premise on idealisation and linearity:

One of the central themes of consumer culture is transformation: the ‘before-and-after’ images, in which the new image is presented as a ‘proof’ of the value of the time, money and energy expended. This suggests that a new body image is seen as the key to a new positive self-image, exciting lifestyle and better quality of life. (2010, 197)

Levy-Navarro also highlights how this linear, forward-looking logic is present in our cultural imperative for the perpetuation and maximisation of life (notably heterosexual reproduction, or “healthiest” focus on slenderness) or the prospect of a future happy (after) life. The author’s discussion on our cultural teleological mindset parallels that of post-structuralist consumer researchers on Western metaphysics. Thompson and Hirshman (1995) discuss the pervasive cultural influence of the Judeo-Christian ideal of virtuous self-consecration to the afterlife, and of the Cartesian quest for rationality and progress. Both are forward-looking, requiring an obliteration of the material or perceptual constraints of human embodiment, and shape our sense of purpose as well as ideals, loathed identities, or “possible selves” (Markus and Nurius 1986). This contemporary teleological focus typically includes socially constructed – and promise-filled – quests such as that of success, knowledge, efficiency, wealth, posterity, maturity, longevity, nobility, eternal youth, absolute health, beauty, gender essence and spiritual transcendence; those forward-looking, normative aspirations that makeup the envisioned ideal selves of so many (again, to use Markus and Nurius’ concept). Whereas, these ideals are commonly seen as good (the healthiest quest of slenderness is very rarely criticised), their commonly accepted pursuit renders, as a result, certain non-normative, transgressive identities in the present – such as the homosexual, the “disabled,” the “unhealthy,” the “ugly” or the “fat,” for instance – as “passé”: undesirable, trivial, obstructive or even dangerous.
Owing to the Western metaphysical legacy, feminine ideals have generally been constructed in terms of religious virtues, such as that of humility, altruism, motherliness and generosity, chastity or sexual passivity, gentleness, temperance or asceticism as well as patience and diligence (Synnott 1993). These ideals, referred to as “disembodied” for they require a control of the mind over the “sinful” temptations experienced by the body, often make for what is thought of as a beautiful appearance (Synnott 1993; Thompson and Hirshman 1995). An attractive body (and with a bit of a creative leap, a young and sexually enticing, yet, asexual one) is often seen as the reflection of a virtuous mind or, alternatively, of the scientific progress of mankind, manifested through optimal diets, cosmetology or plastic surgery (Thompson and Hirshman 1995). Conversely, females deviating from these virtues/norms of femininity are often castigated, especially by the marketplace, as inappropriate, lacking, or unattractive (Bordo 1993) and are summoned to join the quest for an ideal future self (Schouten 1991).

The idealisation of the past can be seen as a very similar process to idealising the future. Levy-Navarro argues that the official linear History, or in other words, the idealised version of the past, is generally sustained by a forward-looking sense of morality; a “champion” ideal end. Similarly, Hutcheon contends that: “[i]f the present is considered irredeemable, you can look either back or forward. The nostalgic and utopian impulses share a common rejection of the here and now” (2000, 204). Longing for the retro or futuristic ideals can be seen as very similar indeed, for they are both a process of idealisation and result from expectations in the present. For instance, Goulding highlights that retro and nostalgia “select aspects from the past, always positive and mixes them with the modern to create a new hybrid form that appeals to contemporary expectations” (2003, 57).

**Queering time as an alternative to the idealisation of the past**

Levy-Navarro argues that “by refusing to live their lives according to a modern, linear sensibility [and] make their present secondary to an elusive future” (Levy-Navarro 2008), some chose to adopt a different logic: a “queer sense of time.” Such is the case, according to the author, of those who refuse to adhere to reproductive futurism, as well as to the quest for future, normative slenderness. A queer sense of time can be used by those who associate their present identities with, and gain inspiration from, the past – the non-idealised one especially – however, authentic, hypothetical or imagined, rather than solely with an envisioned and progressive sense of the future, or utopian past. This suggests that certain types of backward-looking or seemingly nostalgic performances, such as those of neo-burlesque, can disrupt, in our forward-looking cultural context, the linear logic of time and idealisation; as such they reinvest non-ideal, or “passe” identities/bodies with new meanings. This research thus addresses questions such as: What are the practices used by the neo-burlesque community in relation to retro and contemporary feminine ideals? What are their effects on the idealisation process? Finally, what are the effects of these practices on the present and the current self?

**Method**

This research is the outcome of over 18 months spent observing and interacting with the neo-burlesque community in Canada and the USA. As suggested by historian Allen (1991), even the least nostalgic storyteller would say that one should have been there to understand what burlesque was. Similarly, as argued by New York Times journalist,
Lee (New York Times 2009): “[j]ust as burlesque loses most of its oomph when put on video – No art is more dependent on the intimacy of live performance – self-esteem trips are less compelling to hear about than to experience firsthand.” Thus, for the sake of this research, the immersion in the neo-burlesque community was almost a necessity. I adopted an ethnographic approach with an emergent design, making use of the participant observation including observational and reflective note taking, photography as well as audio recording of interviews, lessons, workshops, conferences and a small discussion group.

My involvement with the neo-burlesque community has been gradual. I started as a relative neophyte to the scene, itself emergent in Montreal, and tried to understand the movement more broadly. From January to April 2007, I participated in two series of six courses of neo-burlesque dance and stripteasing, conducted by a pioneering performer of the Montreal scene. This was an opportunity to get familiar with the codes of the genre, to meet women newly interested by this practice and to experience, for myself, performing in private groups. This, fortunately or otherwise, appeared to be the extent of my “career” as a burlesque performer. Early on, I was also initiated into the neo-burlesque scene by attending my first shows. I followed the periodic events (including private group performances) of two more established neo-burlesque collectives and their distinct audiences. During that period, several discussions and interviews were conducted in and out of context with performers, spectators and apprentices selected according to a purposeful sampling. As a general rule, I inquired about the participant’s motivations and relationship to the scene, and, more particularly, about their relationship to their gender and body, as mediated by their interaction with the neo-burlesque community. Interviews were recorded and complemented by contextual notes and impressions. In addition, I attended my first burlesque festival, in Toronto (summer 2008), along with members of a Montreal troupe. I later participated in the first Montreal Burlesque Festival, which took place at the end of September 2009, both as a spectator and as a volunteer translator (English to French) for the festival’s marketing material. The more formal observation fieldwork, however, was carried out during the “Great Boston Burlesque Exposition and Vintage Fashion Fair” held in April 2009. This event, gathering several hundreds of performers and fans from different parts of the USA and Canada, was a great opportunity to further immerse myself in the community and be – literally – bombarded with stage performances over the course of a sequin-filled three days. The organising committee took me under their wing, authorising my presence as a researcher, and accrediting my (male) collaborator as a photographer for the event. Combined with field notes, photos enabled the capturing of the aesthetic/discursive aspect of performance such as the scenarios, tones, gestures, costumes, accessories, stage, as well as other contextualising factors.

The festival gave me the opportunity to participate in advanced workshops and lessons (dance, makeup, pin-up poses, etiquette, DIY costumes and stage combat!), to attend a legends conference, a burlesque fashion fair, social events such as cocktails and a retro pool party, as well as a small burlesque art exhibition. With the agreement of the instructors and participants, photos and audio recordings were made of advanced workshops, lessons and conferences of different types. I also seized the opportunity to host a discussion group, “Birds of a Feather’s sessions;” a semi-structured discussion on feminism and female representation in neo-burlesque. Four participants were at the rendezvous – particularly articulate and passionate about the proposed topic – and were able to feed a very rich discussion. Of course, I am aware of the relative
unrepresentativeness of the small group in the broader scale of the community. However, I used this data set in the triangulation of points of view. As with most interviews taking place during the festival, questions were asked about the incentive to take part in the community, the feminist allegiances and potential of the practice, what united seemingly “rebel” and more “naive” performances on the same stage as well as if, and in what way, burlesque could be seen as challenging mass-mediated female representations. Finally, I also collaborated in a few scheduled hosting tasks, including catering to the needs of legends (performers from the 1950–1960s, some of whom are now in their 70s), allowing me to experience the festival from both the front and the back of the scene and giving back — to a very small extent — to the community for its generosity and collaboration in this research.

Aside from the more in-depth understanding it enabled, the ethnographic approach was useful in establishing and maintaining a relationship of trust with respondents: a critical element in a context involving sensitive and delicate subject matters such as sexuality and intimacy, body image and gendered identity. Using personal sensitivity, empathy and self-disclosure proved not only valuable to understand, but also necessary to reassure and comfort some respondents, as well as to be alert to looming emotional distress. My standpoint as a female researcher who shares in many respect characteristics met in several informants — white, middle class, at the time in my late 20s, slightly fuller in terms of body shape, educated at the university level, well-known for my exasperating enthusiasm for everything vintage/glam/kitsch, and inhabited by a pre-existing set of concerns about contemporary female representation in visual culture — were my main vehicle to experience the field. On one hand, it may have facilitated access (burlesque striptease classes are generally reserved for women) and identification with and from respondents, but as an interpretation point, it has been constantly commanding self-awareness and reflectivity. If this research cannot pretend to be more than my own interpretation and experience of the field, an important effort was nonetheless made to maintain a critical distance.

Formally, I collected over 1500 photos and over 10 hours of audio material from interviews, conferences and workshops in both French and English, including conversations with 10 artists and 5 spectators. However, I conversed with over 50 members of the community and interacted with hundreds more, and experienced well over 200 neo-burlesque acts of different styles (Table 1).

Data analysis began as early as the first month of my involvement in the field, while I was trying to get a feel for various types of burlesque performance, including the codes used, the type of intent and motivations underlying the performers and audience’s participation, as well as the impact of an affiliation with burlesque on identity. What especially struck me is how a performance like that of neo-burlesque was often said to have offered a certain form of jolt for certain performers and fans, enabling them to not only feel so much better about themselves, but also reconsider their identity from a completely different perspective. Similarly, several performers and fans argued for the emancipatory and feminist virtues of such a practice which can appear strikingly uncanny when thinking of a striptease medium. While engaging in a vain and tortuous endeavour to determine whether neo-burlesque performances could be considered feminist and offer a form of female emancipation, or in which instances it could or could not be, I was marked by how altogether paradoxical the scene was. Triangulating data points such as interviews, notes and photos were crucial here for it allowed me to compare what people said and what they did, which is argued to be “a key strength of ethnography” (Peñaloza 1998, 352). Chasms appeared between...
performers in the same collective or event, even between one performer’s different acts, as well as between their feminist “spiel” and their sometimes seemingly retrosexist or self-indulging performances. I soon realised that performances more often than not offered different takes on feminine ideals, via, not necessarily literal, but signifying practices. As Hebdige (1979) argued after trying to decipher the opaque style of punks – which shares several affinities with burlesque – a practice “may say what it means but it does not necessarily ‘mean’ what it ‘says’” (116).

Thus, to understand the meaning of the performances of the community and reconcile them with their verbal narratives, I had to distance myself from the literal, “piecemeal decoding” by first of all identifying the underlying system, or “generative sets of ideological categories,” at stake in this community’s performance (Hebdige 1979, 116). Ascribing the feminine ideological system, versus broader patriarchal oppression, as the “generative set” allowed me to patently reconcile many of the community member’s interviews and performance discourses. Although I am aware that this is not the only interpretative avenue possible, my subsequent check with community members proved it plausible. Thus, starting with an isolated analysis of evocative

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fictional or artist name</th>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Approximate age</th>
<th>Origin</th>
<th>Data set</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Miss Sugarpuss</td>
<td>Performer and teacher</td>
<td>Early 30s</td>
<td>Montreal</td>
<td>Interview in Montreal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ruby Vaughn Vaughn</td>
<td>Performer</td>
<td>Mid-20s</td>
<td>Boston</td>
<td>Interview in Boston</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Honey Do</td>
<td>Performer and teacher</td>
<td>Early 30s</td>
<td>Boston</td>
<td>Interview in Boston</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Honey Suckle Duvet Rising</td>
<td>Performer and teacher</td>
<td>Early 30s</td>
<td>Boston</td>
<td>Interview in Boston</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spartacus Rising</td>
<td>Performer</td>
<td>20s</td>
<td>New Paltz</td>
<td>Interview in Boston</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>J.Z. Bich</td>
<td>Performer</td>
<td>Early 30s</td>
<td>New York</td>
<td>Focus group in Boston</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>Performer</td>
<td>Early 30s</td>
<td>New York</td>
<td>Focus group in Boston</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clitar Bandit</td>
<td>Performer</td>
<td>Mid-20s</td>
<td>Seattle</td>
<td>Focus group in Boston</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kristy</td>
<td>Spectator</td>
<td>Mid-20s</td>
<td>Boston</td>
<td>Focus group and interview in Boston</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Devillion</td>
<td>Spectator and volunteer</td>
<td>Mid-20s</td>
<td>Bangor</td>
<td>Interview in Boston</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John</td>
<td>Spectator</td>
<td>40s</td>
<td>Boston</td>
<td>Interview in Boston</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phil</td>
<td>Spectator</td>
<td>40s</td>
<td>Boston</td>
<td>Interview in Boston</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Matt</td>
<td>Spectator and volunteer</td>
<td>Early 30s</td>
<td>Boston</td>
<td>Interview in Boston</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Velma Candyass</td>
<td>Performer and teacher</td>
<td>Early 30s</td>
<td>Montreal</td>
<td>Interview in Boston</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Betty Blaize</td>
<td>Performer, teacher, and organiser</td>
<td>Early 30s</td>
<td>Boston</td>
<td>Interview in Boston</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
data sets in order to highlight the salient themes, as well as inherent contradictions, I engaged in a hermeneutic interpretative process (Thompson, Pollio, and Locander 1994; Arnold and Fischer 1994). Then, moving away from “piecemeal decoding” (Hebdige 1979), I reinterpreted these sets “in relation to the developing sense of the ‘whole’” (Thompson, Pollio, and Locander 1994) iteratively trying to see what united (but also distanciated) seemingly contradictory performances on the same neo-burlesque stage, or under the same label. All the way through the process, I enhanced my interpretation of neo-burlesque practices, by looking back at the historical relevance and meanings of the original burlesque practices (with a sense of their embedding cultural context), drawing parallels with the setting of their current revival. This allowed me to interpret the different styles of burlesque as different practices linked to feminine ideals, such as celebration, amplification and spoofing of the ideal, hybridisation of the ideal with the non-ideal, as well as exposition and celebration of the non-ideal.

Results
As a very ambiguous (Allen 1991) and eclectic manifestation, the neo-burlesque community lends itself to different tonalities, intentions and justifications from its members. With varying degrees of technical and aesthetic retro emulation, some will perform for the sake of personal fancy, suggesting sometimes fetishistic tendencies (Schroeder and Borgerson 2002) and self-validation, while others are motivated by an almost-furious rage to express the desire to remove themselves from the constraints of feminine ideology or normativity. Between the two lies a whole world of possibilities and contradictions, by and large making use of humour, eroticism and artful or agile body displays. Furthermore, aside from and beyond being an exercise dedicated to sexual titillation, neo-burlesque striptease can be used by some as a medium of transgression of the established norms.

Emulation: celebrating the retro ideal
The previous analysis of vicarious nostalgics can be very insightful to interpret the inclination towards the past manifested by members of the neo-burlesque community, as well as the increasing amount of adepts from outside the subculture given a current mass popularisation. For instance, various members of the community readily contrast the vintage burlesque figure – spoken of as more “feminine,” “classy,” “glamorous” and “playful,” and even sometimes “realistic” or “accessible” – with the feminine images found in today’s marketplace visual culture, which are polarised as rather “unclassy,” “fake,” “dehumanised” and “upfrontly sexualised.” In this sense, aligning with the retro feminine ideal can be seen as a preference (Goulding 2001, 2002, 2003), but also, to some extent, as a form of resistance (Goulding 2003) to the marketplace’s representation of femininity. On the other hand, this framework of nostalgic idealisation does not account for the more dissident performers found on the scene.

Amplification: highlighting the “faux” of, and creating a distance from the ideal
With workshops on the art of retro pin-up makeup, posture and “pin-up poses in motion” (based on the Delsarte technique), costume making, as well as courses and lectures on elegant burlesque striptease etiquette given by 1950s legends, the members of
the community – burlesquers or aspirants – are being served all the necessary tools to create a hyperfeminine retro character or self (Figure 1).

While this nostalgic feminine masquerade can definitely be seen as a form of fantasy play and frivolous entertainment, other forms can also be interpreted, using the ideas of film studies scholar, Rowe (1995), as an exaggerated and thus even deceitful performance. As expressed by N:

Our troupe, HyperGender, means, taking gender over the top and making it extreme. It could be that you are a transvestite and you play the other gender, or you take your own gender and taking it waaaaaayyy over the top . . . (Group interview, Boston Burlesque Festival, 11 April 2009)

Performers in troupes such as HyperGender Burlesque, Skin Tight Outta Sight or Team Burlesque, to name a few, draw attention to the act of amplification itself and allow for establishing a radical distance between women and gestures normally taken for natural, or essential. Masquerade practices render visible what should have
remained hidden (Rowe 1995); the faux and constructed nature of the norms. While laughing, one of the participants at our group interview shouts:

“For me, when I do burlesque, I feel like I have an inner drag queen...” N, sitting next to her – piercing the laughs – takes over: “No, no, no! It’s true!!... And you’ll see me tonight, I’ll look completely different... [with a more solemn tone, she continues] I’m a fucking drag queen when I get on the stage! There is no doubt about it, my inner drag queen – well, she’s totally flaming gay! [laughs from other participants] I mean, yeah! I totally exploit my inner drag queen!” (Group interview, Boston Burlesque Festival, 11 April 2009)

Several other performers, echoing the infamous Mae West – who reportedly both drew inspiration from and influenced the drag queen repertoire – are characterised as, and even self-qualify as, female drag queens or in other words, as women personifying men personifying women. According to Butler (1999), male feminine impersonators, while skilfully, and in great detail, demonstrating their ability to perform feminine troupes as a man, highlight the mimetic nature of gender, and as such, challenge the unequivocal link between gender and anatomical sex. They create a distance between the actor and the performance. While there is generally a camp, ironic distance between the male–female impersonator and his hyperbolic feminine character, the distance can be that much greater once a female burlesquer, for instance, accentuates the act of a man already amplifying an idealised female performance. There is obviously a risk of confusing a perfectly performed, iterative act with a matter of feminine “essence” (Butler 1999; Schroeder and Borgerson 2003) ... especially in neo-burlesque where the extravagant costumes – used by drag queens to camouflage the excess of anatomical components, or indeed their absence – are stripped away, leaving little doubt about the sex of the individual on the stage (Figure 2).

In a very similar sense, it is important not to confuse the rebel neo-burlesque performer or act, with the retro ideals themselves. While the idealised retro representations generally mirror the prospects of an essential, sexy and happy-go-lucky future, some neo-burlesque performers appear to challenge this linear causal logic, by stripping the ideals from their promises while enacting them with a critical distance. To elucidate this distance between the performer and her character, many will accentuate the unrealistic effect of their masquerade by amplifying mannerisms or facial expressions; or sometimes by using costumes that are bordering on the ridiculous (such as automated-tassel-twirling bustiers) or ostentatiously faux, unpolished and visibly thrown together (with cardboard, aluminium foil, gaffer tape and stuffing in evidence). These sometimes unflattering stylistic ploys, which also include elements such as camp humour and “winking knowingness,” create and maintain “an ironic, laughing distanciation” (Robertson 1996, 5) from feminine ideals, especially aspects of retro representations that are still seen as desirable essentialist prospects.

**Spoofing: delegitimising the ideal and creating space for the non-ideal**

While the masquerade exaggerates the normative, teleological ideal to the point of creating some obvious distance from it, for the performer and the spectator, spoofing can also help to render these (usually disembodied) ideals as not only false, but also infelicitous, pretentious or even hypocritical. L. Diablo, for instance, sends up the nobility and containment of certain characters by characterising a “snobbish bourgeoisie” who steps in dog excrement, and thus performs a striptease act in a “hysterical"
attempt to clean off her shoe. Others take the opportunity to slant, and corrupt the virtue of archetypal characters such as the “straight-laced” Victorian spinster, the “pious” nun, the lovely bride who is supposedly marrying for “love,” and “not money” or the “composed” ballerina. Cooter Nipplestein’s acclaimed performance at the 2008 Toronto Burlesque Festival is a good example of an onstage “fall from grace,” or of an altercation between virtue and one’s “passe” embodied nature. As the introduction goes:

Cooter Nipplestein was fired from the Bolshoi Ballet for being too fat. It’s really not all her fault, her dance partner’s drug problem finally kicked in and he got stuck in K-hole during the performance and dropped her. Since then she has been starring in an off-off-off-off Broadway production of the Nutcracker. Will being forced to visit the land of sweets proves too tempting for Cooter?

Entering the stage with some very skilful ballet dancing, voluptuous Cooter Nipplestein plays the part of a ballerina trying to fit the prescriptive and dainty role of the Sugar Plum Fairy. Gracefully sprinkling confectionary into the audience, she
suddenly becomes enticed by a sweet. Iterating between the contained imperatives of her role and the handling of the all-too-appealing candy, she “sneakily,” albeit resentfully, eats one, then another . . . and then one after the other, after the other. Cooter’s polished ballet performance is visibly side-tracked by her appetite, to the point where, fully abandoning her delicate persona, she engages in a ferocious “gluttonous” binge on the stage; stripping in an attempt to reach every piece of candy that has become entangled in her clothing.

Film studies scholar, Rowe (1995), discusses the subversive potential offered by the threshold between virtuous and “unruly” femininity. The author recounts that female leads have historically been predominantly restricted to the genres of melodrama and romantic comedy. Unlike melodrama, where the lead female character triumphs over enduring suffering through displays of virtue, the romantic comedy implies a threshold for the questioning of the lead’s identity and “value” (in the virtuous sense). A return to virtue, for which the female heroine is conventionally repaid by a happy (ever after) ending (with a man, typically), usually puts an end to this state of liminality. But this particular dualistic zone in comedy, when the woman is the author (as opposed to “the butt of the joke”) and when stripped of the imperative for a saccharin ending, creates a privileged space for play, transgression and statement making. This dualistic zone can thus be seen as a fertile ground for the creation of new meanings and attachments with unruly, “passé” female identities. As such, the threshold between vice and virtue found in certain neo-burlesque comedic acts can be seen as “queering time;” and the non-idealised, silly or ironic (nude?) outcome of a comedic performance, as another way to disrupt the forward-looking logic of rationality and gender decency found in our Western culture (Figure 3).

Hybridisation: blurring the frontiers of time, of the ideal and the non-ideal

Whereas authenticity has been identified as an important quest for vicarious/aesthetic nostalgics (Belk and Costa 1998; Goulding 2001, 2002, 2003), and can thus be seen as a desirable feature of acts for certain members of the neo-burlesque community, deliberate hybridisation – at the risk of not pleasing everyone – is also a widespread element in more grassroots neo-burlesque performances. Just like Lydia Thompson, the mother of burlesque herself, “bastardised” epic plays nearly a century and a half ago (Allen 1991), some members of the community, with their acts, behaviours and costumes, juxtapose aspects of different temporalities, as well as combine “ideals” with “non-ideals,” in an embracing but nonetheless sometimes reflective, manner.

While other women sitting in a workshop were savouring every word of advice on burlesque etiquette from a 1950s legend, performer Velma Candyass, sitting alongside, prodding me with an elbow, whispered in my ear “Yeah . . . See . . . that’s SO not us!” Velma and her troupe, while playing with several codes and gestures of the old-time burlesque striptease performances, like to substitute certain dainty expressions of femininity with sometimes bolder, “quirky” movements. This subversion is also intensified by their messier, punk-goth appearance, and conveyed by their name: The Dead Doll Dancers (Figure 4). For Velma, and others, I encountered during the fieldwork, one of the main reasons for mastering these codes seem to be “all the better to meddle with them,” mixing and matching them with their own creative vision and subcultural affiliations. Neo-burlesque retro masquerade can thus be seen as an opportunity for bricolage, where objects and gestures belonging to different temporal spaces are assembled, substituted or displaced in the conventional frame, or order of the feminine
performance. This, in turn, can lead to subversive, ambiguous or idiosyncratic representations, drawing from the past, present and envisioned future, rather than solely idealised versions of the first or the latter.

Another form of hybridisation serving subversive or more disruptive purposes in burlesque revival is absurdity, which often has an interesting, disorienting effect on new spectators expecting a more conventional striptease. Absurd humour is often used as the basic, justifying narrative for neo-burlesque striptease routine: a performer that reaches out to, and strips a man in the audience; a chick that hatches from its egg; the Titanic enacting its fatal “attraction” for an iceberg; or a “neurotic” circus master trying, in vain, to persuade a sculpture of a panther to jump through a hoop. I can also find several nods to the absurd – or maybe not so absurd after all – where men wear sequined nipple tassels, or when some performers integrate deliberate lengths, pauses or ruptures into their routines, thus highlighting the neo-burlesque illusion, and reminding us of our presence as a spectator. As highlighted by Hebdige for surrealism, absurdity can be perceived as an “assault on the syntax of everyday life which dictates the way in which the most mundane objects are used” (1979, 105). Absurdity disrupts by reverting, substituting or altogether obliterating the meaning of
familiar objects, but also by doing so to performances and discourses perceived as “normal” and endowed with a normative power. Freed from the constraints of reality, rationality and an idealised end, absurdity “queers” time, stimulating new outlooks on different temporal spaces and encouraging the emergence of alternative, “inconsequential” identities (those generally deemed irrelevant to make the official account of History).

**Grotesque: exposing and celebrating the non-ideal**

Wow, I didn’t know you could do a performance like that with the body that she has! This is what got me into burlesque in a way. (Interview with a performer referring to her first encounter with burlesque, Boston Burlesque Festival, 12 April 2009)

With its exploitation of humour, chaos, absurdity, frivolity, indecency and blasphemy, the neo-burlesque enclave can be read, just like its original form (Allen 1991), as a...
carnivalesque manifestation. As recalled by consumer researchers referencing the work of Bakhtin, carnivalesque enclaves, turning status quo on its head, meddle with “champion” ideals in society, and in turn, let the “low,” “grotesque” identities emerge and be celebrated (Belk and Costa 1998; Goulding and Saren 2009; Kates 2003). While humour, parody and striptease are integral parts of the neo-burlesque movement, so is the grotesque, which is commonly used as a descriptor of burlesque, presumably to account for its “low” status and buffoon propensity. While consumer researchers have explored grotesque matters indirectly, in relation to “deviant” identities and sartorial styles (Goulding and Saren 2009), fetichistic desires and sexualised depiction (Schroeder and Borgerson 2002), sadistic behaviour and tendencies (Fitchett 2002), but also, to embodied considerations such as excrements (Bradshaw and Canniford 2010), Goulding, Saren, and Follett (2003) have approached the matter more directly with their work on the grotesque body – with the consumer appeal for public autopsies and dead body exhibition. As they are discussing its potential to elicit fear, disgust, laughter and fascination, the authors, referencing Bakhtin and Russo, associate the grotesque body with “non-ideal” embodied characteristics such as death, pregnancy (traditionally seen as taboo), upper age, disability, disfigurement, “abnormal weight,” notably including also references to bodily functions and fluids. But while often associated with the darker side of humanity – because in direct contrast with disembodied ideals – grotesque is first and foremost, a reminder of our embodied state as humans. As it “exaggerate[s] incompleteness, process and change, [it also] maintain[s] a kind of moral neutrality or ambivalence toward time and death” (Russo 1995, 32) and is therefore neither idealising nor necessarily loathing the present, the past, the future nor possible identities. While burlesque is commonly thought of and used as a representational tool or label to marginalise the “low” women – especially those deemed unvirtuous, “too fat,” “too ugly,” “too old” or otherwise “passe´” – according to Russo (1995) and Rowe (1995) recalling the work of Bakhtin, it can also be used as an affirmative emancipatory tool for women, especially given its moral neutrality and non-discriminatory nature as a process. In this perspective, Rowe discusses the potential of the “unruly woman” character in cinema, who, “dwells close to the grotesque.” Because of the perceived symbolic violence associated with the term grotesque, and despite the fact that it is intended in the most neutral, if even celebratory way, I will (like Rowe), revert to the word “unruly,” which seems appropriate and much less offensive in our cultural context, to suggest the practice of grotesque in neo-burlesque.

Referencing Zemon Davis, Rowe typecasts the unruly woman as dominant, assertive, immodest and untamed; as a prankster not scared of using autoderision; as verbally and physically excessive and having no will nor desire to control her appetite; at the margin of beauty standards (but nonetheless seductive), older (and refusing to become invisible); and known for her libertine propensity or her ambiguous gender identity. She speaks her mind, imposes herself, disturbs others and creates disorder. Inspiring sometimes revulsion, but also attraction, the unruly woman exists in a state of ambiguous liminality, which gives her great potential to “queer” the logic of normativity. The “passe´” unruly woman is a recurring theme in neo-burlesque performances, and manifests itself through various combinations of acts, including also sporadic references to gender bending, “deviant” sexualities, heretic materialism, alcohol abuse or drug consumption.

An example of the troups of unruly femininity is Candy Baby Caramelo (Figure 5), a burlesque legend from the 1960s, welcomed into the neo-burlesque community. In her 70s at the time of the research, and delightfully voluptuous, she repeatedly
alludes with pride to her past (and rather “passé”) title of the “biggest showgirl in the world.” Using humour and turning what can be otherwise culturally interpreted as flaws into the most magnificent seductive assets, she challenges the perception of fat as a “repulsive” concept. Caressing her hips sensually on stage, she informs the audience, with an imperious tone and a saucy grin that “this is not fat: this is filet mignon,” and, amorously pinching her love handles, she enticingly shares that “with every ripple is a new adventure.” Endlessly, slipping a combination of tongue-in-cheek, risqué and materialistic remarks into her acts, combining stand-up comedy, song and dance, her character is an example of self-indulgence, cupidity, bawdiness and complete lack of modesty; in short, the archetype of the unruly woman. Similar to Cooter Nipplestein and many others using sinfulness, aggression, “insanity” and vulgarity, this type of grotesque performance allows one to highlight the fallacy, indeed the impossibility of the accepted historic norms of femininity, reflecting instead the image of a viscerally embodied woman, possessed by emotions and prone to temptation. Such an assertive and celebratory depiction of the unruly woman (Mae West,
Miss Piggy, and Roseanne aside as Rowe (1995) suggests) is generally evacuated from the mass-mediated representations, which rather portray individuals deemed grotesque, as objects of fear, repulsion and laughter.

Honey Suckle Duvet, a beautiful curvaceous artist, projects her Black (as she puts it) community’s worship of curves into a broader social context that, as she says, rather lacks this type of exposure and association of body diversity. Although she loves the grandeur and beauty of styles of the past and uses them both as a source of pleasure and as a heightening agent for her performances, she critically observes that burlesque has mostly been a tradition in the service of white males and she does not, therefore, feel the need to pay a particular tribute to this form.

Honey Suckle Duvet, who also teaches burlesque striptease as a form of body acceptance for her students, performs as part of her more subversive repertoire, a satirical number where she first subverts the cliché of the black “thug,” and then scrutinises her physical “flaws” in a fictional mirror. Turning her back on the audience while still looking at the spectators, she firmly squeezes her “love handles” and then her generous buttocks. Peeling off her bra, she then lifts her breasts by compressing them ridiculously and turns around to the public with a comical face squirming with discomfort. She concludes the number by dropping her natural breasts, and exposing herself to the public, as she is, addressing the audience with a proud and content smile. Demonstrating the process of attachment to certain allegedly “unruly” traits is disruptive to the extent that it renders them as undue sources of worry. This performance, transforming autoderision/self-scrutiny into assertion, reclaims aspects of a “passe” identity and displays a confrontational attitude towards the requirements of the dominant ideological system. In this sense, the performer “engage[s] with the past to reshape (…) present in ways that are more [diversity] positive” (Levy-Navarro 2009, 18 emphasis added).

In an interview following this acclaimed and prize-winning number for the category “most beautiful” at the Boston festival, she recalls how she tried to “be the funniest [she] can” in order to get her message across. She indicates with conviction that “if that takes people to a place where they are loving themselves, THEN, mission accomplished!” which points to Turner’s belief that, “[w]hen play makes serious statements about human condition, people take its outcome seriously” (Turner 1986, 137).

In several neo-burlesque performances, the non-idealised body is set free and made conspicuous by its nudity and unbridled movements. As a grotesque form par excellence, neo-burlesque emphasises the “lower-stratum” – below the shoulders and waist – as opposed to the much nobler “upper-stratum;” the head, seat of the mind. In other burlesque performances, dimpled skin or “drooping” body parts – generally loathed within a contemporary context – can thus be exposed and their fleshy characteristics even voluntarily magnified with the giggles, bumps and twirlings typical of the movement. These unbridled gestures, with “primitive” undertones, combined with a degree of sexual assertiveness from the performer, can result in sensual representations counteracting the “decorative” or “engineered” disembodied representation of feminine sexuality with which we tend to be more familiar (Bordo 1993; Orbach 2009). In a sense, these new manifestations can be perceived as a way, according to Russo (1995), to disrupt the “mechanisms of desire,” both masculine and feminine, by altering the normative definition, albeit minimally or temporarily, of female gender, beauty and sexuality.

In a similar sense, Levy-Navarro indicates that aligning with the grotesque or “revolting” bodies “can help to disrupt the dominant representational regime, offering other sorts of attachments and other sorts or rehumanising values” (Levy-Navarro 2008, 29). This is obviously not to say that burlesque bodies are by any means repulsive!
Aligning with the present embodied self

Schouten (1991) in his article about identity reconstruction in the context of plastic surgery highlights how the ideal selves in terms of (female) bodily appearances are often drawn from romantic and erotic projections promoted by popular visual culture. These can be quite limited. Neo-burlesque, as a disruptive erotic and even romantic performance, can help to broaden the scope of desirable and possible erotic selves, thus allowing women to transpose themselves into it, and to perceive themselves as sexually attractive. This resonates in the countless testimonies of female spectators, often returning home and performing for themselves, for their partner, or subsequently joining the performers’ ranks. Furthermore, this notion of eroticism – rather than simply being associated with the projection of an idealised sexualised image – could also become associated with the notion of feminine desire and pleasure: to be sexual.

Burlesque entitled me to be more in touch with my body, comfortable with my body. I started doing burlesque at my heaviest weight (...) and to me, being able to be comfortable with who [I am] on stage, it means that I have no hang-ups in the bedroom. I mean, I feel freer as a woman and as a sexual being. (Interview performer “Honey Do,” Boston Burlesque Festival, 11 April 2009)

This new framing of femininity, deviating from the sexualised (decoratively, sexually enticing) yet asexual (not having sexual desire herself) representational norm, enabled many women to reconsider their body not as an object, or antagonist to an envisioned future self, but as a source of pleasure, mystery and amazement in the present. As burlesque fan Kristy expresses in an interview:

I just didn’t know ... I just didn’t know you could be like that – like I am – and project yourself like that ... It changed everything ... I am not beautiful by ... I never felt beautiful by modern standards ... I’m much fuller, and I didn’t think about being beautiful until I really discovered burlesque. It’s been kind of great since, because I feel like my hating of being myself has gotten a lot better ... (Interview “Kristy,” burlesque spectator, Boston Burlesque Festival, 11 April 2009)

Whereas Goulding suggests that vicarious consumption results from a preference for the past rather than a pronounced discomfort with the present, this fieldwork provides the empirical evidence that there is indeed a feeling of incongruity with the present that can be experienced by members of retro communities such as that of neo-burlesque; particularly with regards to gender ideals, including body and sexual identity. Several respondents, performers and spectators, thus described being completely shaken after exposure to the celebration of women deviating from the current norms of beauty, youth and slenderness, and highlighted the considerable impact on their way of viewing their current and ideal gendered and bodily identity.

This identity upheaval can be paralleled with those resulting from the manifestation of the “unruly woman,” notably thanks to Lydia Thompson (Allen 1991) and Mae West (Rowe 1995), in their respective times. Guided by these new meanings and attachments for the “passe” woman, several respondents claim now to be allowing themselves to deviate from female norms (in terms of their waifishness, modesty, passivity and self-denial) in an affirmative manner, by following their drive and desires. As noted by anthropologist Jackson in his clubbing context, “[p]eople are no longer expected to live the sanitised life of an object” (Jackson 2004, 173).
Discussion

The overarching hypothesis of this research is that certain types of neo-burlesque performances disrupt the temporal logic of progress, or idealisation, and as such can reinvest non-normative, non-ideal identities and bodies with new meanings (Levy-Navarro 2008, 2009). Staged in a hypothetical past, and borrowing codes from its original genre (itself deemed back in the day as a form of preposterous distraction), neo-burlesque performances allow for not only a fanciful type of entertainment, a revisiting of retro ideals, but also, of “forgotten” “passé” identities. The fieldwork allowed for observing practices related to the performance of feminine ideals in the neo-burlesque context, and for addressing their effects on the idealisation process. For instance, the emulation of retro ideals, which is generally found in those vicarious nostalgics demonstrating “simple nostalgia,” can be interpreted as a celebration of retro ideals. While they do look towards the past and thus disrupt, in some respect, the common linearity of time, they also, more likely than not, leave the idealisation process unaltered. On the other hand, practices seen to varying extents as more subversive, critical or transgressive of the ideal, offer this possibility to disrupt both the linear process of time and idealisation. Subversive practices found in the field include amplification, to highlight the “faux” of, and create a distance from the ideal; spoofing, to delegitimise the ideal and create, as Rowe (1995) would put it, a space for the non-ideal; and hybridisation, to blur the frontiers of time as well as between the ideal and the non-ideal. Finally, some performances can be seen as transgressing the ideal while adopting elements of the grotesque – the “more primitive,” “passé” notions of the self – the “fat,” the “old,” the “sexual,” the “unbridled,” the “blasphemous” and thus exposing and often celebrating the non-ideal.

While celebrating retro ideals can help to restore a sense of continuity when faced with an unsatisfactory present (Davis 1979; Goulding 2001) – a continuity or bridge with the utopia of a better future, perhaps? – practices that queer this linear process of idealisation and disrupt the nostalgic sense of continuity seem to have the potential effect of making us more aware, grounded in, and appreciative of the possibilities offered by the here and now. Thus, with their queering practices – in which nostalgia, or rather, temptation to idealisation can even be seen as a leavening agent – neo-burlesque performances can not only legitimise, but also literally privilege the “before” – the present – rather than the improved, normative “after,” often referred to as the “ideal self.” This research also enabled the observation that, as a result of these new forms, tensions between the body and the envisioned sense of self could be superseded, entitling respondents to reach for a new sense of dignity and pleasure in their present.

From a quest for the ideal self to the grounding in the present self

OK, I have a little arm fat and you can see my love handles, I don’t care! Everybody’s got them... It’s now satire! (Interview “Kristy,” burlesque spectator, Boston Burlesque Festival, 11 April 2009)

As discussed earlier, we have a tendency, in our modern consumer culture to consider the body and its proclivities as a hindrance to the achievement of the future ideal self. In this sense, the “passé” body is disconnected from the sense of self, hoping rather for an ideal future body which better reflects one’s innermost true self. Many respondents met in this field henceforth adopted a perspective that can be interpreted as an embodied one: considering their “passé,” current body with its history (experiences, wrinkles, fat and colour) as an integral part of their identity. This identity paradigm,
which both fosters “unity between the body and the self” (Charmaz 1995) and re-endows the “passé” body and its subjective experience with value and legitimacy, is from my speculative position an important key to achieving what our respondents’ have termed as “inner peace,” or “harmony” with their body. This same sense of contentment with oneself also seems to be achievable when one lets go of past and future ideals, in order to enjoy their actual, present self.

Congruity between the body and the self was discussed by Schouten, who argues that body altering consumption activities, including diets and surgery, can be used by women in an attempt to restore “harmony to an ambiguous, incongruous, or unsatisfying self-concept” (1991, 422). This would allow them to achieve a sense of unity between the body and the (forward-looking) ideal sense of self. On the other hand, Parmentier and Fischer (2011) in their article dealing with female fashion models – women who embody and reflect the promises of beauty and elite lifestyle – suggest that those who actualised their ideal selves in some respects, can get there “only to find that fully inhabiting and sustaining the coveted identity is impossible” (2011, 23). Focusing on forward-looking ideals can thus be quite “unsustainable,” or vain and utopic, considering that “the very nature of embodiment imposes physical limits on the degree to which individuals may actualize body ideals” (Patterson and Elliott 2002, 239).

Conversely, sociologist Charmaz (1995), who studied the loss and reaggregation of body and self-unity with chronically ill patients, highlights how it is possible via an adaptation process to (re)achieve self-congruity, even when experiencing an imperfect, decaying body (Charmaz 1995, 657) that perhaps belongs more to the past than the future. Emphasising the importance of identity trade-offs and goal reassessments in the patient’s adaptation process, Charmaz noted that self-congruity could come by altering the notion of ideal self in order to reflect/fit the current (even imperfect/decaying) embodied self. This radically accepting perspective, which seems to reflect the new life paradigm adopted by certain of our respondents, differs greatly from the postmodern body altering tendency highlighted by Schouten (1991).

Of course, it would be misleading to suggest that this new congruity is easy, always occurring, or even bullet-proof. “Adapting seldom occurs only once” in Charmaz’ context (1995, 657), and this presumably also applies in other cases, such as the neo-burlesque community. However, by valuing “passé”/present identities and bodies, like in the neo-burlesque space, congruity is no longer restrained by the physical limits of embodiment itself (indeed, the opposite) nor is it solely reserved for a future that might never come. In this sense, in a context where consumer researchers are increasingly interested in finding ways to counteract the negative tensions elicited by the marketplace culture, this article highlights the very relevant possibilities offered by the creative and disruptive practices, and state of mind of unruly “consumers”/cultural producers.

The retro ideal and the “passé” in advertising and consumer research

Virtually unheard-of before 2000, there has been, in recent years, a widespread commercial renaissance of the burlesque and neo-burlesque aesthetic. Figures such as Dita Von Teese and Immodesty Blaize have risen from obscurity to become increasingly recognised and even associated with such high-profile brands as MAC Cosmetics, Dior, WonderBra, Cointreau, Perrier and Renault. Popular music icons such as the Pussycat Dolls and Lady Gaga (allegedly previous burlesquers), as well as Katy Perry, Britney Spears and Rihanna, to name but a few, strongly suggest the burlesque aesthetic
in several of their appearances. In Hollywood, the 2010 blockbuster “Burlesque” starring Christina Aguilera and Cher, brought neo-burlesque to the big screen, while French actor and director Mathieu Almaric saw his film “On Tour” – where neo-burlesque stars played themselves – acclaimed by the 2010 Cannes festival audience. Brands, and the entertainment industries, including some nude dancer clubs, event promoters and adult websites, are now recognising a potentially lucrative market and fuelling the neo-burlesque frenzy by courting their audiences with glitzy and saucy retro imagery. With an increasing number of people adopting and promoting its aesthetic and attending, arranging and performing in events, neo-burlesque undergoing a mainstreaming process. Aside from the “On Tour” film, which reflects the more dissident sensibility of the form, the popularisation of the genre has also fostered a different understanding of neo-burlesque as predominantly a form of “sexy” entertainment, with a retro sensibility, featuring archetypal notions of femininity, including hourglass female beauties. It appears clear that the sanitised commercial renaissance is still looking forward to conventional, albeit retro, gender norms and ideals and has lost in translation some of the more subversive dimensions of its more dissident original form and revivalist subculture.

These sanitised images can be seen as an attempt to elicit “simple” nostalgia, which Havlena and Holak (1991) contend is quite understandably widespread in marketing, for it requires less cognitive effort from the consumer-reader and makes for more easily recognisable, or legible identity categories. More critical or ironic responses from the reader, on the other hand, would often require that image makers provide or point to countervailing meanings within their ad – potentially more than just adding a “knowing wink” to a sexy pin-up. As Hutcheon (2000) reminds us, a message is not ironic (or nostalgic) in itself, but can elicit such a response when the reader has enough countervailing meanings to process it as such. References to countervailing meanings are often omitted by advertisers for the sake of a clear, unambiguous “selling” message, or potentially even, as argued by Schroeder and Borgerson, as a reactive attempt “to reinforce the status quo.” This creates “the illusion of fixed and stable categories” in the face of updated social understandings of certain identity categories such as gender, by “reiterating the female subject through retro representations, sexist ads, and so forth” (Schroeder and Borgerson 2003, 11).

Whereas consumers can be seen as engaging in a form of creative identity play with images provided by the marketplace, Schroeder and Borgerson remind us that underlying “tacit” processes (or stereotyping reflexes) operating in most individuals, can limit creative play, instead “lead[ing] people to interpret on the basis of subtle visual cues, social categories, and cognitive schemas, and generally serv[ing] to psychologically justify the status quo, operating as an identifiable and stable interpretive convention” (2003, 4).

In the absence of countervailing meanings about identity categories and roles (such as those sometimes found in more grassroots burlesque scenes), and given a widespread tacit interpretation process, Schroeder and Borgerson suggest that advertisers allegedly “deconstructing,” “queering” and “laughing” at conventional identity categories may instead result – because of their iteration of historical ideals, in “reinforce[ing] cultural stereotypes of essential gender differences,” especially in ads which might specifically serve this function (2003, 8). Context and intention really matter in the case of subversive practices.

From the perspective of a form that both broadened the identity scope of women, while, conversely, contributed greatly to their sexual objectification, the history of
burlesque enables one to retrospectively scrutinise the processes that diluted these meanings and attachments. It seems clear that the current mainstreaming and institutionalisation of burlesque with brands, favouring its “kitschy” and sexy decorative aspects over its more dissident potential, seems to be history repeating itself. But the current revival of burlesque as a transgressive form, as well as the history of burlesque itself, also suggests that non-normative representations of femininity were and are still perhaps not as lacklustre or undesirable as we tend to assume, especially not for female consumers who related to these images. Although some will warn against such a route, concerned that it will reinforce negative associations, this research prompts me to make the daring suggestion that the transgressive practices of burlesque, with their use of unruly femininity or what can otherwise be perceived as grotesque, show interesting ways for certain identities to be re-claimed and re-endowed with panache. Unlike iterations such as Dove, where bigger or older women are portrayed as timid, passive, wholesome and “happy-go-lucky,” in burlesque they can be more assertive, immodest, irreverent, sexual (again, as opposed to just sexualised), aping, lusty... They are subjects in control (or out of control), rather than subjected to the critical eye that wants to make their image more palatable to an idealising society. Representations of unruly femininity such as those found in burlesque often rather suggest that women in these embodied positions can enjoy life too, indeed more so than their idealised counterparts, for they seem to seize the present like there is no tomorrow, no better happy-ever-after future.

Mainstream marketing shows few signs of being daring enough to engage in this type of play – despite its “daring” propensity to construct sexualised images – instead continuing to use weight and age as lucrative signifiers of fear and loathing. This leaves an opportunity for neo-burlesquers and other subcultural/alternative entrepreneurs and image makers (such as the lush and irreverent fatashionistas, for instance) to thrive in an increasingly fragmented market, supported by the internet, in which some people not only seek to find alternative ways to end their feeling of alienation in the present, but feel enthralled by the prospect of a more dissident, embodied take on life.

Conclusion and limits

Although striptease is a very important and interesting part of neo-burlesque, the conscious decision was made to focus less on it, and more on the potential impact (as described by some respondents) of the nostalgic and creative gender dimensions that characterise some current, and perhaps the more transgressive neo-burlesque performances. While this account of the North American neo-burlesque scene can in no way be considered as fully representative of the movement as a whole, this article, as suggested by Levy-Navarro, focuses on the creative engagement made by a number of community members with identities considered as “passe,” or buried in the past. The argument made in this article is that certain more grassroots types of neo-burlesque performances do not just delve into the past to escape the present as would members from some other subcultures (see Belk and Costa 1998), but rather, use alternative versions the past to disrupt the widespread idealisation process, which is itself hindering the full enjoyment of the present (self). This research highlights that some members of the neo-burlesque community, by queering time, knock down its linear confining logic to create a more enjoyable or inhabitable present. This alternative temporal logic is informed by considerate care for their own embodied realities and histories, as well
as the multiple past, current and future selves envisioned by their own playful or dis-
sident imagination.

The past helps us reinterpret our fat in ways that are transformative. We are only stuck in
an all-too-oppressive present if we impose on ourselves the modern temporal logic in
which the past is supposedly over and done with, in which justice and joy can only be
achieved in some utopian future. There is justice and joy enough right now, if we only
use our imaginations to write histories that move across the conventional logic of time.
(Levy-Navarro 2009, 21)

Finally, although it is often argued that nostalgically revisiting the past equates to
the pursuit of simplicity and order, my experience in the neo-burlesque community
brings me to suggest that it is possible for individuals to interact nostalgically with
the past in quest of just the opposite: complexity or ambiguity. Importantly, rather
than a dilettante postmodern exercise, playing with the past in this sense can be seen
as a creative attempt to broaden the realm of possible identities and life meanings in
order to achieve self-congruity.

Note
1. But sometimes also professional and men.

References
of Consumer Research 21 (1): 55–70.
University of California Press.
Retro-Escape of Hawaii.” In Time, Space, and the Market: Retroscales Rising, edited by
Bradshaw, Alan, and Robin Canniford. 2010. “Excremental Theory Development.” Journal of
Butler, Judith. 1999. Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity. New York:
Routledge.
MacMillan.
Featherstone, Mike. 2010. “Body, Image and Affect in Consumer Culture.” Body and
Society 16 (1): 193–221.
Goulding, Christina. 2002. “An Exploratory Study of Age Related Vicarious Nostalgia and
Aesthetic Consumption.” In Advances in Consumer Research, edited by Susan M.
Consumer Research.
Junkies.” In Time, Space, and the Market: Retroscales Rising, edited by Stephen Brown


that Underlie Consumers’ Expressed Meanings.” 


